

Alexandra Kollontai

The Social Basis of the Woman Question

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The Social Basis of the Woman Question

Leaving it to the bourgeois scholars to absorb themselves in discussion of the question of the superiority of one sex over the other, or in the weighing of brains and the comparing of the psychological structure of men and women, the followers of historical materialism fully accept the natural specificities of each sex and demand only that each person, whether man or woman, has a real opportunity for the fullest and freest self-determination, and the widest scope for the development and application of all natural inclinations. The followers of historical materialism reject the existence of a special woman question separate from the general social question of our day. Specific economic factors were behind the subordination of women; natural qualities have been a secondary factor in this process. Only the complete disappearance of these factors, only the evolution of those forces which at some point in the past gave rise to the subjection of women, is able in a fundamental way to influence and change their social position. In other words, women can become truly free and equal only in a world organised along new social and productive lines.

This, however, does not mean that the partial improvement of woman's life within the framework of the modern system is impossible. The radical solution of the workers' question is possible only with the complete reconstruction of modern productive relations; but must this prevent us from working for reforms which would serve to satisfy the most urgent interests of the proletariat? On the contrary, each new gain of the working class represents a step leading mankind towards the kingdom of freedom and social equality: each right that woman wins brings her nearer the defined goal of full emancipation. ...

Social democracy was the first to include in its programme the demand for the equalisation of the rights of women with those of men; in speeches and in print the party demands always and everywhere the withdrawal of limitations affecting women; it is the party's influence alone that has forced other parties and governments to carry out reforms in favour of women. And in Russia this party is not only the defender of women

in terms of its theoretical positions but always and everywhere adheres to the principle of women's equality.

What, in this case, hinders our "equal righters" from accepting the support of this strong and experienced party? The fact is that however "radical" the equal righters may be, they are still loyal to their own bourgeois class. Political freedom is at the moment an essential prerequisite for the growth and power of the Russian bourgeoisie., without it, all the economic welfare of the latter will turn out to have been built upon sand. The demand for political equality is for women a necessity that stems from life itself.

The slogan of "access to the professions" has ceased to suffice; only direct participation in the government of the country promises to assist in raising women's economic situation.' Hence the passionate desire of women of the middle bourgeoisie to gain the franchise, and hence their hostility to the modern bureaucratic system.

However, in their demands for political equality our feminists are like their foreign sisters; the wide horizons opened by social democratic learning remain alien and incomprehensible to them. The feminists seek equality in the framework of the existing class society, in no way do they attack the basis of this society. They fight for prerogatives for themselves, without challenging the existing prerogatives and privileges. We do not accuse the representatives of the bourgeois women's movement of failure to understand the matter; their view of things flows inevitably from their class position. ...

The Struggle for Economic Independence

First of all we must ask ourselves whether a single united women's movement is possible in a society based on class contradictions. The fact that the women who take part in the liberation movement do not represent one homogeneous mass is clear, to every unbiased observer.

The women's world is divided, just as is the world of men, into two camps; the interests and aspirations of one group of women bring it close to the bourgeois class, while the other group has close connections with the proletariat, and its claims for liberation encompass a full solution to the woman question. Thus although both camps follow the general slogan of the "liberation of women", their aims and interests are different. Each of the groups unconsciously takes its starting point from the interests of its own class, which gives a specific class colouring to the targets and tasks it sets itself. ...

However apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that

fundamental transformation of the contemporary economic and social structure of society without which the liberation of women cannot be complete.

If in certain circumstances the short-term tasks of women of all classes coincide, the final aims of the two camps, which in the long term determine the direction of the movement and the tactics to be used, differ sharply. While for the feminists the achievement of equal rights with men in the framework of the contemporary capitalist world represents a sufficiently concrete end in itself, equal rights at the present time are, for the proletarian women, only a means of advancing the struggle against the economic slavery of the working class. The feminists see men as the main enemy, for men have unjustly seized all rights and privileges for themselves, leaving women only chains and duties. For them a victory is won when a prerogative previously enjoyed exclusively by the male sex is conceded to the "fair sex".

Proletarian women have a different attitude. They do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life. It is true that several specific aspects of the contemporary system lie with double weight upon women, as it is also true that the conditions of hired labour sometimes turn working women into competitors and rivals to men. But in these unfavourable situations, the working class knows who is guilty. ...

'The woman worker, no less than her brother in misfortune, hates that insatiable monster with its gilded maw which, concerned only to drain all the sap from its victims and to grow at the expense of millions of human lives, throws itself with equal greed at man, woman and child. Thousands of threads bring the working man close. The aspirations of the bourgeois woman, on the other hand, seem strange and incomprehensible. They are not warming to the proletarian heart; they do not promise the proletarian woman that bright future towards which the eyes of all exploited humanity are turned. ...

The proletarian women's final aim does not, of course, prevent them from desiring to improve their status even within the framework of the current bourgeois system, but the realisation of these desires is constantly hindered by obstacles that derive from the very nature of capitalism. A woman can possess equal rights and be truly free only in a world of socialised labour, of harmony and justice. The feminists are unwilling and incapable of understanding this; it seems to them that when equality is formally accepted by the letter of the law they will be able to win a comfortable place for themselves in the old world of oppression, enslavement and bondage, of tears and hardship. And this is true up to a certain point. For the majority of women of the proletariat, equal rights with men

would mean only an equal share in inequality, but for the “chosen few”, for the bourgeois women, it would indeed open doors to new and unprecedented rights and privileges that until now have been enjoyed by men of the bourgeois class alone. But each new concession won by the bourgeois woman would give her yet another weapon for the exploitation of her younger sister and would go on increasing the division between the women of the two opposite social camps. Their interests would be more sharply in conflict, their aspirations more obviously in contradiction.

Where, then, is that general “woman question”? Where is that unity of tasks and aspirations about which the feminists have so much to say? A sober glance at reality shows that such unity does not and cannot exist. In vain the feminists try to assure themselves that the “woman question” has nothing to do with that of the political party and that “its solution is possible only with the participation of all parties and all women”; as one of the radical German feminists has said, the logic of facts forces us to reject this comforting delusion of the feminists. ...

The conditions and forms of production have subjugated women throughout human history, and have gradually relegated them to the position of oppression and dependence in which most of them existed until now.

A colossal upheaval of the entire social and economic structure was required before women could begin to retrieve the significance and independence they had lost. Problems which at one time seemed too difficult for the most talented thinkers have now been solved by the inanimate but all-powerful conditions of production. The same forces which for thousands of years enslaved women now, at a further stage of development, are leading them along the path to freedom and independence. ...

The woman question assumed importance for woman of the bourgeois classes approximately in the middle of the nineteenth century — a considerable time after the proletarian women had arrived in the labour arena. Under the impact of the monstrous successes of capitalism, the middle classes of the population were hit by waves of need. The economic changes had rendered the financial situation of the petty and middle bourgeoisie unstable, and the bourgeois women were faced with a dilemma of menacing proportions., either accept poverty, or achieve ,the right to work. Wives and daughters of these social groups began to knock at the doors of the universities, the art salons, the editorial houses, the offices, flooding to the professions that were open to them. The desire of bourgeois women to gain access to science and the higher benefits of culture was not the result of a sudden, maturing need but stemmed from that same question of “daily bread”.

The women of the bourgeoisie met, from the very first, with stiff resistance from men. A stubborn battle was waged between the professional men, attached to their “cosy little

jobs”, and the women who were novices in the matter of earning their daily bread. This struggle gave rise to “feminism” — the attempt of bourgeois women to stand together and pit their common strength against the enemy, against men. As they entered the labour arena these women proudly referred to themselves as the “vanguard of the women’s movement”. They, forgot that in this matter of winning economic independence they were, as in other fields, travelling in the footsteps of their younger sisters and reaping the fruits of the efforts of their blistered hands.

Is it then really possible to talk of the feminists pioneering the road to women’s work, when in every country hundreds of thousands of proletarian women had flooded the factories and workshops, taking over one branch of industry after another, before the bourgeois women’s movement was ever born? Only thanks to the fact that the labour of women workers had received recognition on the world market were the bourgeois women able to occupy the independent position in society in which the feminists take so much pride. ...

We find it difficult to point to even one fact in the history of the struggle of ‘the proletarian women to improve their material conditions to which the general feminist movement has contributed significantly. Whatever the proletarian women have achieved in the sphere of raising their own living standards is the result of the efforts of the working class in general and of themselves in particular. The history of the struggle of the working women for better conditions of labour and for a more decent life is the history of the struggle of the proletariat for its liberation.

What, if not the fear of a dangerous explosion of proletarian dissatisfaction, forces the factory owners to raise the price of labour, reduce hours and introduce better working conditions? What, if not the fear of “labour unrest”, persuades the government to establish legislation to limit the exploitation of labour by capital? ...

There is not one party in the world that has taken up the defence of women as social democracy has done. The working woman is first and foremost a member of the working class, and the more satisfactory the position and the general welfare of each member of the proletarian family, the greater the benefit in the long run to the whole of the working class. ...

In face of the growing social difficulties, the sincere fighter for the cause must stop in sad bewilderment. She cannot but see how little the general women’s movement has done for proletarian women, how incapable it is of improving the working and living conditions of the working class. The future of humanity must seem grey, drab and uncertain to those women who are fighting for equality but who have not adopted the proletarian world outlook or developed a firm faith in the coming of a more perfect social system. While the contemporary capitalist world remains unchanged, liberation must seem to

them incomplete and impartial. What despair must grip the more thoughtful and sensitive of these women. Only the working class is capable of maintaining morale in the modern world with its distorted social relations. With firm and measured step it advances steadily towards its aim. It draws, the working women to its ranks. The proletarian woman bravely starts out on the thorny path of labour. Her legs sag; her body is torn. There are dangerous precipices along the way, and cruel beasts of prey are close at hand.

But only by taking this path is the woman able to achieve that distant but alluring aim — her true liberation in a new world of labour. During this difficult march to the bright future the proletarian woman, until recently a humiliated, downtrodden slave with no rights, learns to discard the slave mentality that has clung to her, step by step she, transforms herself into an independent worker, an independent personality, free in love. It is she, fighting in the ranks of the proletariat, who wins for women the right to work; it is she, the “younger sister”, who prepares the ground for the “free” and “equal” woman of the future.

For what reason, then, should the woman worker seek a union with the bourgeois feminists? Who, in actual fact, would stand to gain in the event of such an alliance? Certainly not the woman worker. She is her own saviour; her future is in her own hands. The working woman guards her class interests and is not deceived by great speeches about the “world all women share”. The working woman must not and does not forget that while the aim of bourgeois women is to secure their own welfare in the framework of a society antagonistic to us, our aim is to build, in the place of the old, outdated world, a bright temple of universal labour, comradely solidarity and joyful freedom. ...

Marriage and the Problem of the Family

Let us turn our attention to another aspect of the woman question, the question of the family. The importance that the solution of this urgent and complex question has for the genuine emancipation of women is well known. The struggle for political rights, for the right to receive doctorates and other academic degrees, and for equal pay for equal work, is not the full sum of the fight for equality. To become really free woman has to throw off the heavy chains of the current forms of the family, which are outmoded and oppressive. For women, the solution of the family question is no less important than the achievement of political equality and economic independence.

In the family of today, the structure of which is confirmed by custom and law, woman is oppressed not only as a person but as a wife and mother, in most of the countries of the civilised world the civil code places women in a greater or lesser dependence on her husband, and awards the husband not, only the right to dispose of her property but also the right of moral and physical dominance over her. ...

Where the official and legal servitude of women ends, the force we call “public opinion” begins. This public opinion is created and supported by the bourgeoisie with the aim of preserving “the sacred institution of property”. The hypocrisy of “double morality” is another weapon. Bourgeois society crushes woman with its savage economic vice, paying for her labour at a very low rate. The woman is deprived of the citizen’s right to raise her voice in defence of her interests: instead, she is given only the gracious alternative of the bondage of marriage or the embraces of prostitution — a trade despised and persecuted in public but encouraged and supported in secret. Is it necessary to emphasise the dark sides of contemporary married life and the sufferings women experience in connection with their position in the present family structure? So much has already been written and said on this subject. Literature is full of depressing pictures of the snares of married and family life. How many psychological dramas are enacted! How many lives are crippled! Here, it is only important for us to note that the modern family structure, to a lesser or greater extent, oppresses women of all classes and all layers of the population. Customs and traditions persecute the young mother whatever the stratum of the population to which she belongs; the laws place bourgeois women, proletarian women and peasant women all under the guardianship of their husbands.

Have we not discovered at last that aspect of the woman question over which women of all classes can unite? Can they not struggle jointly against the conditions oppressing them? Is it not possible that the grief and suffering which women share in this instance will soften the claws of class antagonism and provide common aspirations and common action for the women of the different camps? Might it not be that on the basis of common desires and aims, co-operation between the bourgeois women and the proletarian women may become a possibility? The feminists are struggling for freer forms of marriage and for the “right to maternity”; they are raising their voices in defence of the prostitute, the human being persecuted by all. See how rich feminist literature is in the search for new forms of relationships and in enthusiastic demands for the “moral equality” of the sexes. Is it not true that while in the sphere of economic liberation the bourgeois women lag behind the many-million strong army of proletarian women who are pioneering the way for the “new woman”, in the fight for the solution, of the family question the laurels go to the feminists?

Here in Russia, women of the middle bourgeoisie — that army of independent wage-earners thrown on to the labour market during the 1860s — have long since settled in practice many of the confused aspects of the marriage question. They have courageously replaced the “consolidated” family of the traditional church marriage with more elastic types of relationship that meet the needs of that social layer. But the subjective solution of this question by individual women does not change the situation and does not relieve the overall gloomy picture of family life. If any force is destroying the modern form of the family, it is not the titanic efforts of separate and stronger individuals but the inanimate

and mighty forces of production, which are uncompromisingly budding life, on new foundation's. ...

The heroic struggle of individual young women of the bourgeois world, who fling down the gauntlet and demand of society the right to "dare to love" without orders and without chains, ought to serve as an example for all women languishing in family chains — this is what is preached by the more emancipated feminists abroad and our progressive equal righters at home. The marriage question, in other words, is solved in their view without reference to the external situation; it is solved independently of changes in the economic structure of society. The isolated, heroic efforts of individuals is enough. Let a woman simply "dare", and the problem of marriage is solved.

But less heroic women shake their heads in distrust. "It is all very well for the heroines of novels blessed by the prudent author with great independence, unselfish friends and extraordinary qualities of charm, to throw down the gauntlet. But what about those who have no capital, insufficient wages, no friends and little charm?" And the question of maternity preys on the mind of the woman who strives for freedom. Is "free love" possible? Can it be realised as a common phenomenon, as the generally accepted norm rather than the individual exception, given the economic structure of our society? Is it possible to ignore the element of private property in contemporary marriage? Is it possible, in an individualistic world, to ignore the formal marriage contract without damaging the interests of women? For the marital contract is the only guarantee that all the difficulties of maternity will not fall on the woman alone. Will not that which once happened to the male worker now happen to the woman? The removal of guild regulations, without the establishment of new rules governing the conduct of the masters, gave capital absolute power over the workers. The tempting slogan "freedom of contract for labour and capital" became a means for the naked exploitation of labour by capital. "Free love", introduced consistently into contemporary class society, instead of freeing woman from the hardships of family life, would surely shoulder her with a new burden — the task of caring, alone and unaided, for her children.

Only a whole number of fundamental reforms in the sphere of social relations — reforms transposing obligations from the family to society and the state — could create a situation where the principle of "free love" might to some extent be fulfilled. But can we seriously expect the modern class state, however democratic it may be, to take upon itself the duties towards mothers and children which at present are undertaken by that individualistic unit, the modern family? Only the fundamental transformation of all productive relations could create the social prerequisites to protect women from the negative aspects of the "free love" formula. Are we not aware of the depravity and abnormalities that in present conditions are anxious to pass themselves off under this convenient label? Consider all those gentlemen owning and administering industrial enterprises who force women among their workforce and clerical staff to satisfy their

sexual whims, using the threat of dismissal to achieve their ends. Are they not, in their own way, practising "free love"? All those "masters of the house" who rape their servants and throw, them out pregnant on to the street, are they not adhering to the formula of "free love"?

"But we are not talking of that kind of 'freedom object the advocates of free marriage. "On the contrary, we demand the acceptance of a 'single morality' equally binding for both sexes. We oppose the sexual licence that is current, and view as moral only the free union that is based on true love." But, my dear friends, do you not think that your ideal of "free marriage", when practised in the conditions of present society, might produce results that differ little from the distorted practice of sexual freedom? Only when women are relieved of all those material burdens which at the present time create a dual dependence, on capital and on the husband, can the principle of "free love" be implemented without bringing new grief for women in its wake. As women go out to, work and achieve economic independence, certain possibilities for "free love" appear, particularly for the better-paid women of the intelligentsia. But the dependence of women on capital remains, and this dependence increases as more and more proletarian women sell their labour power. Is the slogan "free love" capable of improving the sad existence of these women, who earn only just enough to keep themselves alive? And anyway, is not "free love" already practised among the working classes and practised so widely that the bourgeoisie has on more than one occasion raised the alarm and campaigned against the "depravity" and "immorality" of the proletariat? It should be noted that when the feminists enthuse about the new forms of cohabitation Outside marriage that should be considered by the emancipated bourgeois woman, they speak of "free love", but when the working class is under discussion these relationships are scornfully referred to as "disorderly sexual intercourse". This sums up their attitude.

But for proletarian women at the present time all relationships, whether sanctified by the church or not, are equally harsh in their consequences. The crux of the family and marriage problem lies for the proletarian wife and mother not in the question of the sacred or secular external form, but in the attendant social and economic, conditions which define the complicated obligations of the working-class woman, of course it matters to her too whether her husband has the right to dispose of her earnings, whether he has the right by law to force her to live with him when she does not want to, whether the husband can forcibly take her children away etc. However, it is not such paragraphs of the civic code that determine the position of woman in the family, nor is it these paragraphs which make for the confusion and complexity of the family problem. The question of relationships would cease to be such a painful one for the majority of women only if society, relieved women of all those petty household cares which are at present unavoidable (given the existence of individual, scattered domestic economies), took over responsibility for the younger generation, protected maternity and gave the mother to the child for at least the first months after birth.

In opposing the legal and sacred church marriage contract, the feminists are fighting a fetish. The proletarian women, on the other hand, are waging war against the factors that, are behind the modern form of marriage and family. In striving to change fundamentally the conditions of life, they know that they are also helping to reform relationships between the sexes. Here we have the main difference between the bourgeois and proletarian approach to the difficult problem of the family.

The feminists and the social reformers from the camp of the bourgeoisie, naively believing in the possibility of creating new forms of family and new types of marital relations against the dismal background of the contemporary class society, tie themselves in knots in their search for these new forms. If life itself has not yet produced these forms, it is necessary, they seem to imagine, to think them up whatever the cost. There must, they believe, be modern forms of sexual relationship which are capable of solving the complex family problem under the present social system. And the ideologists of the bourgeois world — the journalists, writers and prominent women fighters for emancipation one after the other put forward their “family panacea”, their new “family formula”.

How utopian these marriage formulas sound. How feeble these palliatives, when considered in the light of the gloomy reality of our modern family structure. Before these formulas of “free relationships” and “free love” can become practice, it is above all necessary that a fundamental reform of all social relationships between people take place; furthermore, the moral and sexual norms and the whole psychology of mankind would have to undergo a thorough evolution, is the contemporary person psychologically able to cope with “free love”? What about the jealousy that eats into even the best human souls? And that deeply-rooted sense of property that demands the possession not only of the body but also of the soul of another? And the inability to have the proper respect for the individuality of another? The habit of either subordinating oneself to the loved one, or of subordinating the loved one to oneself? And the bitter and desperate feeling of desertion, of limitless loneliness, which is experienced when the loved ceases to love and leaves? Where can the lonely person, who is an individualist to the very core of his being, find solace? The collective, with its joys and, disappointments and aspirations, is the best outlet for the emotional and intellectual energies of the individual. But is modern man capable of working with this collective in such a way as to feel the mutually interacting influences? Is the life of the collective really capable, at present, of replacing the individual's petty personal joys? Without the “unique”, “one-and-only” twin soul, even the socialist, the collectivist, is quite alone in the present antagonistic world; only in the working class do we catch the pale glimpse of the future, of more harmonious and more social relations between people. The family problem is as complex and many-faceted as life itself. Our social system is incapable of solving it.

Other marriage formulas have been put forward. Several progressive women and social thinkers regard the marriage union only as a method of producing progeny. Marriage in itself, they hold, does not have any special value for woman — motherhood is her purpose, her sacred aim, her task in life. Thanks to such inspired advocates as Ruth Bray and Ellen Key, the bourgeois ideal that recognises woman as a female rather than a person has acquired a special halo of progressiveness. Foreign literature has seized upon the slogan put forward by these advanced women” with enthusiasm. And even here in Russia, in the period before the political storm [of 1905], before social values came in for revision, the question of maternity had attracted the attention of the daily press. The slogan “the right to maternity” cannot help producing lively response in the broadest circles of the female population. Thus, despite the fact that all the suggestions of the feminists in this connection were of the utopian variety, the problem was too important and topical not to attract women.

The “right to maternity” is the kind of question that touches not only women from the bourgeois class but also, to an even greater extent, proletarian women as well. The right to be a mother — these are golden words that go straight to “any women’s heart” and force that heart to beat faster. The right to feed “one’s own” child with one’s own milk, and to attend the first signs of its awakening consciousness, the right to care for its tiny body and shield its tender soul from the thorns and sufferings of the first steps in life — what mother would not support these demands?

It would seem that we have again stumbled on an issue that could serve as a moment of unity between women of different social layers: it would seem that we have found, at last, the bridge uniting women of the two hostile worlds. Let us look closer, to discover what the progressive bourgeois women understand by “the right to maternity”. Then we can see whether, in fact, proletarian women can agree with the solutions to the problem of maternity envisaged by the bourgeois fighters for equal rights. In the eyes of its eager apologists, maternity possesses an almost sacred quality. Striving to smash the false prejudices that brand a woman for engaging in a natural activity — the bearing of a child — because the activity has not been sanctified by the law, the fighters for the right to maternity have bent the stick in the other direction: for them, maternity has become the aim of a woman’s life. ...

Ellen Key’s devotion to the obligations of maternity and the family forces her to give an assurance that the, isolated family unit will continue to exist even in a society transformed along socialist lines. The only change, as she sees it, will be that all the attendant elements of convenience or of material gain will be excluded from the marriage union, which will be concluded according to mutual inclinations, without rituals or formalities — love and marriage will be truly synonymous. But the isolated family unit is the result of the modern individualistic world, with its rat-race, its pressures, its loneliness; the family is a product of the monstrous capitalist system. And yet Key hopes

to bequeath the family to socialist society! Blood and kinship ties at present often serve, it is true, as the only support in life, as the only refuge in times of hardship and misfortune. But will they be morally or socially necessary in the future? Key does not answer this question. She has too loving a regard for the “ideal family”, this egoistic unit of the middle bourgeoisie to which the devotees of the bourgeois structure of society look with such reverence.

But it is not only the talented though erratic Ellen Key who loses her way in the social contradictions. There is probably no other question about which socialists themselves are so little in agreement as the question of marriage and the family. Were we to try and organise a survey among socialists, the results would most probably be very curious. Does the family wither away? or are there grounds for believing that the family disorders of the present are only a transitory crisis? Will the present form of the family be preserved in the future society, or will it be buried with the modern capitalist system? These are questions which might well receive very different answers. ...

With the transfer of educative functions from the family to society, the last tie holding together the modern isolated family will be loosened; the process of disintegration will proceed at an even faster pace, and the pale silhouettes of future marital relations will begin to emerge. What can we say about these indistinct silhouettes, hidden as they are by present-day influences?

Does one have to repeat that the present compulsory form of marriage will be replaced by the free union of loving individuals? The ideal of free love drawn by the hungry imagination of women fighting for their emancipation undoubtedly corresponds to some extent to the norm of relationships between the sexes that society will establish. However, the social influences are so complex and their interactions so diverse that it is impossible to foretell what the relationships of the future, when the whole system has fundamentally been changed, will be like. But the slowly maturing evolution of relations between the sexes is clear evidence that ritual marriage and the compulsive isolated family are doomed to disappear.

The Struggle for Political Rights

The feminists answer our criticisms by saying: even if the arguments behind our defence of the political rights of women seem to you mistaken, is the importance of the demand itself, which is equally urgent for feminists and for representatives of the working class, thereby reduced? Cannot the women of the two social camps, for the sake of their common political aspirations, surmount the barriers of class antagonism that divide them? Surely they are capable of waging a common struggle against the hostile forces that surround them? Division between bourgeois and proletarian is inevitable as far as

other questions are concerned, but in the case of this particular question, the feminists imagine, the women of the various social classes have no differences.

Feminists keep returning to these arguments with bitterness and bewilderment, seeing preconceived notions of partisan loyalty in the refusal of representatives of the working class to join forces with them in the struggle for women's political rights. Is this really the case?

Is there a complete identity of political aspirations, or does antagonism hinder the creation of an indivisible, above-class army of women in this instance as in all others? We have to answer this question before we can outline the tactics that proletarian women will employ in winning political rights for their sex.

The feminists declare themselves to be on the side of social reform, and some of them even say they are in favour of socialism — in the far distant future, of course — but they are not intending to struggle in the ranks of the working class for the realisation of these aims. The best of them believe, with a naive sincerity, that once the deputies' seats are within their reach they will be able to cure the social sores which have in their view developed because men, with their inherent egoism, have been masters of the situation. However good the intentions of individual groups of feminists towards the proletariat, whenever the question of class struggle has been posed they have left the battlefield in a fright. They find that they do not wish to interfere in alien causes, and prefer to retire to their bourgeois liberalism which is so comfortably familiar.

No, however much the bourgeois feminists try to repress the true aim of their political desires, however much they assure their younger sisters that involvement in political life promises immeasurable benefits for the women of the working class, the bourgeois spirit that pervades the whole feminist movement gives a class colouring even to the demand for equal political rights with men, which would seem to be a general women's demand. Different aims and understandings of how political rights are to be used create an unbridgeable gulf between bourgeois and proletarian women. This does not contradict the fact that the immediate tasks of the two groups of women coincide to a certain degree, for the representatives of all classes which have received access to political power strive above all to achieve a review of the civil code, which in every country, to a greater or lesser extent, discriminates against women. Women press for legal changes that create more favourable conditions of labour for themselves; they stand together against the regulations legalising prostitution etc. However, the coincidence of these immediate tasks is of a purely formal nature. For class interest determines that the attitude of the two groups to these reforms is sharply contradictory. ...

Class instinct — whatever the feminists say — always shows itself to be more powerful than the noble enthusiasms of "above-class" politics. So long as the bourgeois women

and their “younger sisters” are equal in their inequality, the former can, with complete sincerity, make great efforts to defend the general interests of women. But once the barrier is down and the bourgeois women have received access to political activity, the recent defenders of the “rights of all women” become enthusiastic defenders of the privileges of their class, content to leave the younger sisters with no rights at all. Thus, when the feminists talk to working women about the need for a common struggle to realise some “general women’s” principle, women of the working class are naturally distrustful.

From: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1909/social-basis.htm>

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